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Law Firms Go Hybrid Forever

What does 'hybrid' mean?

No one thought this would happen—the embrace of hybrid operations. Prior to the pandemic, a little over a third (37%) of attorneys wanted to work from home. Today, that number has more than doubled to 86%. When Morgan Stanley wrote its now infamous open letter to law firms demanding lawyers come back to the office, law firms bristled, but delayed mandating official RTO dates until September of 2022—which, too, has now passed.

There are many persuasive reasons for firms to listen to their attorneys, but here are a few: (1) the two years when firms doors were shuttered were two of the most profitable years on record, and (2) record levels of attrition and lateral moves show a labor market adjusting itself to new opportunities for how lawyers work, and (3) of the firms that do try to mandate specific RTO schedules, compliance is low, below 50%. Even when they try, firms can't get their lawyers back into the office.

But what do we even mean when we say 'hybrid'? It turns out, many things. Hybrid comes along a spectrum. For some firms, hybrid means one day a week mandated in the office; for some, it means four. For some firms, hybrid doesn't come with a mandate; in this case, hybrid means 'Come in whenever you want. Your office is still your office.' Let's call this Hybrid 0. At the other end of the spectrum, hybrid means hoteling, i.e. intentionally creating an office environment that has fewer desks than people and no one has a personal office. Let's call this Hybrid 5. Most firms are somewhere in the middle.

To make hybrid even more complex, some larger firms implement a mixture of approaches from office to office at the same firm. Offices in large cities, for instance, may implement one of many hoteling models as the culture demands relaxation of longer commuting times. Offices in less congested cities with ample parking and easy commutes may opt for a hybrid model that more resembles a traditional office with private offices and a 'suggested' schedule. Some firms will be motivated by the potential cost savings of real estate reduction, some will not.

The only thing that is certain is that the attorneys have spoken, and they're not coming back. So now the question becomes, how do we make hybrid—in all of its various and complex forms—work?

What Are the Challenges to a Successful Hybrid?

First, let's look at the challenges. For firms to make hybrid work, they must focus on intentionally cultivating experiences attorneys cannot get at home. Two of these 'only in the office' experiences are: (1) collaboration/networking/mentorship activities and (2) culture.

The worst-case scenario for hybrid is when an attorney comes into the office – but the office is a ghost town. Nothing will demotivate RTO faster than just one ineffectual, lonely workday. Firms must figure out how to cluster attorney time to ensure in-office time has the vibrancy, collaboration and networking only an office can offer.

When it comes to culture, this is something almost all law firm leaders agree on: working in person has huge benefits to building culture. The 2022 Citi Hildebrandt Client Advisory found that many firms believe the remote environment has damaged personal relationships at work and the sense of belonging amongst many lawyers--and may be a contributor to the ease with which lawyers, from partners to associates, are moving firms. Culture happens in the office.

Another big challenge of hybrid is its dynamism. We have to remember that we are in the midst of a great experiment with a completely new mode of operation. Things change—often and sometimes fast. Space planning professionals need access to manipulate office plans in new ways as they accelerate change from minor to major. The old way of printing static floor plans and using pencil is not going to do it.

Finally, we need to know how much all of it is costing firms—which brings us to the last great challenge: real estate. How long will firms in 'Hybrid 0' (see above) tolerate the expense of a largely unused space? Where will these firms derive the analytics necessary to propose future change? **Technology, of course.**

Now for the Good Part: Technology

What is needed is technology specifically built to solve the hybrid challenges of law firms, and that's Maptician, the legal industry's end-to-end solution for hybrid. We went to market in 2020 right in synch with the mandated WFH and have continuously built out our platform alongside our law firm clients as they evolve their hybrid needs.

Here's how it works. Maptician is a cloud-based software available on desktop and mobile with an incredibly easy implementation. We start by converting the firm's existing floorplans from static drawings into dynamic floorplans using our proprietary mapping engine with exact renderings to exact spec.

Next step is engaging clients in a seating and hybrid strategy discussion to learn about the various needs of the firm, office by office, practice group by practice group, partner by partner.

Because we specialize in law firms, we've learned a few things along the way of how to do seating strategies and we can advise on how to set up their office plans.

The key is, with our mapping engine, the discussions are visual. One of the key features of Maptician, Scenario Planning, is an unprecedented office space visualization tool powered by our mapping engine and what it does is it enables us to easily create sand-boxed versions of complex seating assignments, furniture layouts, schedules and architecture so firms can optimize their office space and RTO strategies. Even better, once the initial strategy is set, the firm can leverage scenario planning ongoing to continuously evolve their hybrid space, helping firms address the dynamism which is fundamental to a successful hybrid operation.

These visual tools are absolutely key. But we didn't forget about the attorneys who—when they come into the office—want to collaborate and network. Attorneys need to know when their peers are in the office. And not just 'in the office' but which office, on what floor, even at what desk (depending on the level of hybrid). Attorneys also do not want to do extra work to acquire this information. It needs to be easy. That's why we built in Presence. Presence delivers unprecedented visibility into attorneys' in-office presence through an automated and proprietary internet protocol (IP) based integration—enabling attorneys to make quick decisions to align their own in-office time with this information – or not. Presence data utilizes several software tools, including Microsoft Exchange, Outlook, and Office to determine who is in the office and who is working remotely without the need to install any hardware devices. Maptician Presence produces highly accurate location data that provides not only general attendance but specific seat locations within a particular office.

This is the way attorney collaboration happens in the hybrid world: through self-directed actions of the attorneys themselves. And we've made it seamless, at the touch of a button.

We also wanted to help firms who were challenged with legacy space planning tools that are no longer a right fit for hybrid, and so Maptician includes end-to-end solutions including Conference Room Signage integration that not only enables users to see whether a conference room is in use, but has incredibly easy search functions with highly detailed room information including capacity, size, location, Wifi name and password, equipment, accessibility, features and restrictions.

And of course, we help firms address real estate optimization. We use a combination of our proprietary map engine, occupant usage data and supplemental data sources (leases, etc.) to provide exception insights into capacity trends and cost efficiency. This is the last piece in the puzzle of the dynamism of hybrid such that firms are empowered to learn overtime what the most efficient use of their space actually is – from the data.

Conclusion

No one would have predicted hybrid operations – but hybrid is here to stay. Firms have a lot to gain in terms of creating a new culture that attorneys love and achieving but that new culture will be built on flexibility and dynamism only technology can manage.



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